

CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

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1. A remote transaction station, comprising:

5 an inventory of products; and

at least one special product;

said remote transaction station operative to dispense said at least one special product at random to a customer, and to vend a product selected by the customer in the same transaction.

10 2. The remote transaction station of claim 1, wherein

said at least one special product is dispensed in lieu of said selected product;

said remote transaction station detects the dispensing of said at least one special product; and

15 said remote transaction station subsequently dispenses said selected product if said selected product is available in said inventory.

3. The remote transaction station of claim 2, wherein if said selected product is not available in said inventory, said remote transaction station performs an action

20 selected from the group consisting of prompting the customer to select another product

and vending it, refunding the customer's purchase price, and issuing the customer a credit for the selected product.

4. The remote transaction station of claim 2, wherein said at least one special product is randomly distributed within said inventory of said remote transaction station.

5 5. The remote transaction station of claim 2, further comprising an optical detector operative to detect and identify an optical indicia on said at least one special product.

10 6. The remote transaction station of claim 2, further comprising a radio frequency receiver operative to detect and identify a radio frequency signature produced by said at least one special product.

15 7. The remote transaction station of claim 6, wherein said at least one special product contains an active radio frequency transmitter producing said radio frequency signature.

8. The remote transaction station of claim 6,
wherein said radio frequency receiver additionally comprises a radio frequency interrogator, and

20 wherein said at least one special product contains a passive radio frequency transceiver producing said radio frequency signature responsive to a radio frequency interrogation signal.

9. The remote transaction station of claim 2, further comprising a magnetic detector operative to detect a magnetic marker on said at least one special product.

5 10. The remote transaction station of claim 9, wherein said magnetic marker may be selectively set to a sensitized state wherein it is detected by said magnetic detector or a desensitized state wherein it is not detected by said magnetic detector.

10 11. The remote transaction station of claim 2, further comprising a sonic detector operative to detect and identify a sonic source on said at least one special product.

12. The remote transaction station of claim 2, further comprising a detector operative to detect and identify a reactive element on said at least one special product.

15 13. The remote transaction station of claim 12, wherein said detector operates responsive to an effect selected from the group consisting of inductive coupling and capacitive coupling.

20 14. The remote transaction station of claim 2, further comprising an oscillator, and wherein said at least one special product is detected by a perturbation in a frequency of said oscillator caused by said at least one special product.

15. The remote transaction station of claim 2, further comprising:

a first detector operative to detect the dispensing of either said selected product or said at least one special product; and

a second detector operative to detect the dispensing of said selected product but not the dispensing of said at least one special product; and

5 wherein the dispensing of said at least one special product is identified by the lack of indication from said second detector.

16. The remote transaction station of claim 15, wherein said second detector is selected from the group consisting of an optical detector, a radio frequency detector, a
10 sonic detector, a reactive detector, and an oscillator.

17. The remote transaction station of claim 15, wherein said special product is dispensed generally simultaneously with said selected product.

15 18. The remote transaction station of claim 17, wherein said at least one special product is stored separately from said inventory, and is dispensed to the customer along a channel distinct from that by which said selected product is dispensed.

19. The remote transaction station of claim 18, wherein the dispensing of said
20 at least one special product is triggered on a pseudo-random basis.

20. The remote transaction station of claim 19, further comprising a microprocessor, wherein said microprocessor is operative to generate a pseudo-random

number at least at the beginning of each transaction, said pseudo-random number being operative to trigger said dispensing of said at least one special product.

21. The remote transaction station of claim 20, further comprising a wireless communication interface operative to effect a function selected from the group consisting of product selection and product payment, wherein said pseudo-random number generated by said microprocessor is related to an identification code transmitted to said remote transaction station over said wireless communication interface.

22. The remote transaction station of claim 19, wherein the odds of said at least one special product being dispensed is dependent on the method of payment for said selected product.

~~23. A remote transaction station for vending at least one product comprising digital data, wherein at least one special product comprising digital data is additionally dispensed at random with a selected product, in the same transaction.~~

24. The remote transaction station of claim 23, wherein said product and said special product are retrieved from a location remote from said remote transaction station.

25. A system for vending products to a customer, comprising:
an inventory of products;
at least one special product;

a payment acceptance interface; and

; a product dispenser operative to dispense said at least one special product at random to the customer, and to vend a product selected by the customer in the same transaction.

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26. The system of claim 25, wherein said payment acceptance interface comprises a cash acceptor.

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27. The system of claim 25, wherein said payment acceptance interface comprises a magnetic stripe card reader.

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28. The system of claim 25, wherein said payment acceptance interface comprises an optical reader operative to read an optical indicia from a card presented by the customer, that uniquely associates the customer with an account to which the purchase is charged.

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29. The system of claim 25, wherein said payment acceptance interface comprises an RFID reader operative to read a transponder in the customer's possession, said transponder transmitting code to said reader that uniquely associates the customer with an account to which the purchase is charged.

30. The system of claim 25, further comprising an image capture and processing system operative to uniquely identify a customer, said customer being associated with an account to which the purchase is charged.

5 31. The system of claim 25, wherein said payment acceptance interface comprises a biometric sensor operative to uniquely identify a customer, said customer being associated with an account to which the purchase is charged.

10 32. The system of claim 25, wherein said inventory of products comprises at least two distinct products, and wherein said system further comprises a product selection interface.

15 33. The system of claim 32, wherein said product selection interface comprises a plurality of selection buttons, each said selection button associated with a product, and each said selection button operative to select said associated product when actuated by the customer.

20 34. The system of claim 32, wherein said product selection interface comprises a tactile responsive display displaying a plurality of indicia, each said indicia associated with a product, said display operative to select said associated product upon tactile input proximate each said indicia by the customer.

35. The system of claim 32, wherein said product selection interface comprises an audio input transducer operatively connected to an audio processor, said audio processor operative to interpret voice selection commands spoken by the customer.

5 36. The system of claim 32, wherein said product selection interface is operative to receive product selections entered by the customer on a remote device.

37. The system of claim 36, wherein said remote device comprises a mobile radiocommunication terminal.

10 38. The system of claim 36, wherein said product selection interface and said remote device communicate via a short-range radio frequency network interface.

15 39. A method of randomly dispensing a special product from a remote transaction station to a customer, comprising:
accepting payment from the customer;
if more than one product is vended, receiving a selection input from the customer selecting a product;
randomly dispensing to the customer said special product; and
20 vending to the customer said selected product; and
whereby if said special product is dispensed, both said special product and said selected product are dispensed to the customer in the same transaction.

40. The method of claim 39, wherein said remote transaction station comprises an inventory wherein said product and said special product are commingled, and wherein said remote transaction station further comprises a detector operative to detect said special product as it is dispensed, and wherein said transaction station
5 subsequently dispenses said selected product when said special product is detected.

41. The method of claim 40, where in said detector is selected from the group consisting of an optical detector, a radio frequency detector, a sonic detector, a reactive detector, and an oscillator.
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42. The method of claim 39, wherein said remote transaction station contains said product and said special product in separate inventories, and wherein said remote transaction station further comprises a controller operative to generate a special product dispensing signal at random, said special product dispensing signal operative to dispense
15 said special product to the customer.

43. The method of claim 39, wherein accepting payment from the customer comprises operation of a device selected from the group consisting of cash acceptor, optical card reader, magnetic stripe card reader, RFID reader, image capture and
20 processing system, biometric sensor, mobile radiocommunication terminal interface and short-range radio frequency network interface.

44. The method of claim 39, wherein receiving a selection input from the customer selecting a product comprises operation of a device selected from the group consisting of product selection buttons, touch-screen display, voice recognition, mobile radiocommunication terminal interface and short-range radio frequency network interface.

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